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Revolution in Trinidad: ‘Seize Power and Send for James’

... we have been down this road before. On February 26th 1970, when the NJAC stormed the Roman Catholic Church following a protest outside a Canadian bank, they were a small organisation in conflict with the state. It is the sharpness of the conflict centred around support for black students in Canada, which drew thousands into a social movement and hundreds to the membership of NJAC. The then Geddes Granger had to contemplate a new situation. No longer NJAC's particular confrontation with authority but the wider conflict which had beset the social order. Political possibilities soar in times such as these.

(UC DHP Box 9/3)

Having been effectively run out of town by the police, Howe needed to relocate, and quickly, if he was to avoid a criminal libel charge. The move needed to be thought-through. *Black Dimension* had ended prematurely, but Howe had no intention of curtailing his political activism. His thoughts turned to the Caribbean. From the time of the Montreal Congress, if not before, the Caribbean had been a growing part of his political sensibilities. Walter Rodney's *The Groundings With My Brothers* had a particular influence, politicizing his Caribbean identity; for it stressed the need of the black intellectual to talk, spend time, reason and ‘ground together’ with the dispossessed of their community (Rodney 1990: 78). Following the Congress, Howe had determined to make the Caribbean a conscious part of his intellectual development as well as his political activity. With this in mind, he sought out James. Their discussion settled the matter: for the time being at least he would return to Trinidad.

Bus strike

Howe arrived in Trinidad towards the end of April 1969, returning to his parents' house. James had provided him with letters of recommendation to Stephen Maharaj and George Weekes. On arrival, he made contact with Weekes, the radical leader of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU). Weekes, who had collaborated with James in the days of the Workers and Farmer's Party (Henry and Buhle 1992: 199), took the recommendation seriously. As a result, he invited Howe to immerse himself in trade union work. There was a great affection between the two men. Howe and Weekes did not always see eye to eye on matters of strategy and organization, but their differences never rankled. Weekes recognized talent in the younger man and admired his gifts as a public speaker, writer and organizer. As a result, he asked Howe to join the staff of *The Vanguard*, the fortnightly newspaper of the OWTU.

The union was facing a difficult political and economic situation. While the 1950s witnessed considerable economic growth, the 1960s was a difficult time for Trinidad. Balance-of-payment problems re-emerged in the middle of the decade, and industrial modernization led to increasing mechanization and therefore rising unemployment (MacDonald 1986: 149). For much of the 1960s, unemployment was hovering between 14 per cent and 20 per cent of the working population (Palmer 2006: 284). Economic problems coincided with accelerating industrial unrest. In response, the government passed the Industrial Stabilisation Act (ISA), which sought to constrain the unions. In the face of the continuing economic problems and the government's political strategy, a new alliance emerged, uniting students, who were hard hit by the slump and radicalized by Black Power, the urban unemployed and some of the radical unions (MacDonald 1986: 162).

The big news at the time of Howe's arrival was the bus strike, organized by the Transport and Industrial Workers Union (TIWU). The conflict, which had started in late April, escalated into a stand-off between the government and the union. Using the provisions of the ISA, the government declared the strike illegal. The Act, which had been passed in 1965, gave the government fairly comprehensive powers over industrial relations. It circumscribed the right of unions to call strikes, established an industrial court with the power to impose settlements on managers and workers, as well as allowing for severe penalties for non-compliance. The People's National Movement (PNM) justified this as an act of modernization, designed to bring an end to the 'old-fashioned loudmouthed' posturing of the union

leaders. Union leaders, for their part, believed it sacrificed the interests of labour to capital (Ryan 1972: 409–10). Crucially, the TIWU continued its strike in defiance of the ISA. The *Nation* pulled no punches, describing the strikers as a 'lawless breed' (Regis 1999: 247); while the *Trinidad Guardian*, the unofficial organ of official opinion, described the TIWU as 'iconoclasts who would pull down laws, institutions and the very fabric of society in one fell swoop' (*Trinidad Guardian*, 3 May 1969).

Weekes was unperturbed by these reports. There was a long-standing bond between the OWTU and the bus workers, going back to 1961 and the foundation of the TIWU (Alexander and Parker 2004: 309). Moreover, the strike had a broader political significance as it was the most resolute challenge to the ISA since its introduction (Singh 1989: 71; Millette 1994: 344). In this context, Weekes was determined that the OWTU should show its support for the striking bus workers. That said, there were dissenting voices, and there was also the perennial question of tactics. By mid-May, the confrontation had escalated. The problem was now twofold: first, the government had declared the strike illegal and secondly, they had drafted strikebreakers to get the buses moving again.

Conscious that the strike was entering a decisive phase, Weekes called a meeting spanning 11 and 12 May to thrash out a strategy. The composition of the meeting, recorded by Khafra Kambon, attests to the broad range of groups prepared to challenge the government. There were the trade unionists, including Weekes himself and 'a TIWU team'; there were politicians such as 'Vernon Jamadar, official leader of the opposition in Parliament'; academics, like the economist Lloyd Best; lawyers; student radicals 'Geddes Granger, Syl Lowhar, Dave Darbeau, David Murray, Kelshall Bodie'; and Howe, who Kambon described at the time as a 'Trinidadian resident in London closely associated with C. L. R. James' (Kambon 1988: 173). The meeting decided that if the government refused to compromise by 12 May, then the strike-breaking buses would be physically stopped through a campaign of direct action (Abraham 2007: 98). As no compromise was forthcoming, the group agreed to begin their blockade at 5 a.m. the next day.

When Howe arrived at the picket line at 5 a.m. on the morning of 13 May, riot police dressed in khaki, equipped with shields and guns, were positioned outside the depot. At 6 a.m., in time for the first scheduled departures, Clive Nunez of the TIWU addressed the crowd. Weekes, Granger, Darbeau and Howe would play a leading role and risk arrest in order to shield the members of the TIWU. The conflict reached its climax as the first bus rolled out of the depot. Loudspeakers

commanded the protestors to get out of the way. They stood firm as the bus advanced, only to be charged by the police. Weekes clung to the front of the bus until he was dragged off and flung into the back of a police van (Kambon 1998: 178–9). Weekes was not alone, as Howe recalls that the police lashed out at the protestors. In total, 17 were arrested and charged with obstructing the free passage of buses out of the Port-of-Spain depot (Singh 1989: 71). Realizing that there was nowhere to run, Howe jumped into the back of one of the police's black Marias, effectively arresting himself.

The cells to which they were taken were squalid. Kambon recalls, '[t]he overused toilet that could not be flushed in one corner, the many signs scratched on the walls, some hand-painted in human excretion . . . cockroaches crawling under the two dirty sleeping bags' (Kambon 1988: 179–80). For most of the detainees, this was their first experience of prison. Howe was one of the few with any experience of 'the rough side of the police' (Ibid., 181).

Thousands flocked to the gaol from all over the island. Rev Cipriani Howe strode through the astonished multitude in flowing ceremonial robes, demanding to see his son. As a general rule, priests stayed out of radical politics, particularly when it involved prison. But he came in the spirit of Mt. 25.36. The first indication of his father's arrival was a huge roar from the crowd outside. On the inside there was talk of a hunger strike. Granger, whom to Howe's mind was capable of being autocratic, was laying down the direction. Ever the pragmatist, Howe favoured a different approach. When his father appeared at the cell door offering help, Howe told him to 'forget the lawyer, George will sort it out. But I want two cheese burgers and a milkshake!'. Turning to Granger, he made his position plain: 'I am for the hunger strike, but only after I've done eating!' (Howe 2011k).

Fortunately, the inmates did not have to wait for long. Around midday, they were taken through the crowd to the court (Kambon 1988: 195). The arrests had handed an important victory to the unions, and perhaps for this reason, the magistrate proceeded with caution. He allowed the students to go, placing them on a bond conditional on their good behaviour. Employing a little subterfuge, Howe identified himself as a student and left the court a free man.

Groundings

The bus strike, which took place a matter of weeks after his arrival, was Howe's first inkling that revolt was a real possibility in Trinidad. His instinct for

organization led him to work on a small scale, outside parties, outside unions, outside all established formal structures. Starting in the neighbourhood where he grew up, where he was already known, Howe began speaking and encouraging impromptu discussions. His theme was the country's oil industry. He argued that it could and should be run by local people, his proof text Fanon's *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*. The reception was mixed. For some, it went without saying that only white people had the expertise and technical competence to run the industry; others were won over. But crucially, there was no backchat. His neighbours were prepared to hear him out and engage with his arguments, even when wholehearted assent was unforthcoming.

Howe started small, but his activities created a momentum of their own. Through word of mouth, he publicized a meeting on the bed of St Ann's River, or East Dry River, as it is more commonly known, a large unused artificial waterway where Howe had played cricket as a young man. Around a hundred people showed up, sitting on the dry river bed to hear him speak. Howe spoke and read from Fanon, using a candle to illuminate the pages in the failing light. This was not rabble rousing. As Howe recalls his activity at the time, he was speaking with considerable objectivity, his goal to get people thinking about their own experience. Again, the theme was popular control of Trinidad's resources. The speech became the talk of the town, as people chewed over Howe's argument and discussed who agreed and who disagreed. Struck by what Howe had said, Lenin Woolford, who was in the crowd, remembers avidly discussing the matter with his father, a local PNM councillor and socialist, who said 'Darcus is correct, we could control our own oil industry' (Woolford 2011).

In terms of organization, Howe was on the radical edge of events in Trinidad at the time. Certainly, Weekes had no time for the vanguard party, and in this sense, both he and Howe stood squarely in the revolutionary tradition of James. But he still looked to a party, albeit a mass party drawn from the working class, as the vehicle for change. This was where the two disagreed. Howe was convinced that the people would not wait for the formation of a party and a programme. Working at grass-roots level was fundamental to Howe's strategy. First, working with people at a local level would inspire them to participate in their unions, in marches and in political protest more generally. Moreover, their participation would help to set the direction for existing movements and keep the existing leaders in check. Secondly, Howe was adopting the 'one-in-ten' strategy that he had learnt from Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Howe spent time with a small group, inspiring them, encouraging them to think and read for themselves. Then each of them would repeat the process with ten more.

Howe's hope was that within the large demonstrations there would be groups who were ready, not to lead the people, but to publicly reflect their feelings and to encourage them to articulate their own desires. Howe's activities also reflected the influence of Rodney, who argued that the black intellectual 'must attach himself to the activities of the black masses' (Rodney 1990: 77–8). Grounding meant 'getting in touch, working with the people . . . sitting down together to reason' learning from the people themselves (*Ibid.*). These were the different currents and ideas that Howe and James had discussed in London, working out what form new radical organizations might take. The practice developed in Trinidad, as Howe grounded with the unemployed urban youth around Port-of-Spain.

This new 'organisation' had no hierarchy or formal structure, but there was a small group, which Howe referred to as 'the inner sanctum' who stood out from the rest. This group was partly self-selecting; they were people who would turn up early at demonstrations or meetings, in order to discuss strategy. It was through this informal group that Howe kept in contact with the grass roots during the revolution of 1970, and it was through them that he was able to gauge the pace and direction of events in a way, he claims, Weekes never could (Howe 2011k).

The February revolution

If a revolution can be said to have a beginning, Trinidad's Black Power Revolution began on 26 February 1970, which was, by outrageous coincidence, Howe's birthday. The spark was a demonstration of perhaps 200 people, most of whom were students from the University of the West Indies, in protest at the treatment of their fellow students by Sir George Williams University in Canada. Exactly a year before, over 40 students, many of whom were black and some of whom were from Trinidad, were arrested for the occupation and destruction of a computer lab on the George Williams campus.¹ The occupation was organized in response to the alleged racism of one of the university's staff, and as Rosie Douglas argues, the occupation flowed directly from the Congress of Black Writers (Douglas 1975: 137). Its suppression outraged radicals who identified themselves with Black Power. The response in Trinidad was immediate: Geddies Granger and Dave Darbeau established NJAC (pronounced N-Jack), 'a loose confederation of groups' (Pantin 1990: 51) which started on campus but quickly reached out to the unemployed and radicals in the union movement (MacDonald 1986: 163).

A year later, they took their protest to the sites that symbolized Canadian influence, and more broadly the influence of white power, in Port-of-Spain.

The February protest was part of a broader movement. Black Power had been growing in Trinidad for some time. The government unwisely dismissed the movement as 'noisy and inconsequential' (Ibid., 1986).² In so doing, they underestimated its appeal, particularly to the unemployed, who numbered around 45,000 by 1970. Black Power was also attractive to the young, whose high hopes for their newly independent nation had been dashed through the experience of the late 1960s. The mood of the people was evident in the Carnival of February 9. At root, the Carnival was always a celebration of emancipation. The 1970 Carnival mixed masquerade and protest with new symbols: the symbols of Black Power. The *Express* reported: 'The marchers carried huge portraits of Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panthers leader, the late Malcolm X, Carmichael and others. There was also a caricature of Prime Minister Dr Eric Williams, looking somewhat like a pig' (*Express*, 15 February 1970). Howe recalls that among the J'ouvert there were lots of small groups dressed in fierce costumes. The UWI banner carried a powerful and simple critique of life in Trinidad, 'Black blood, black sweat, black tears – white profit' (Ibid.).

The same mood was also evident on 26 February. The protesters marched from the Canadian High Commission, which occupied the Huggins Building on South Quay, to the Royal Bank of Canada on Independence Square. There was a considerable degree of overlap between the leadership of the February demonstration and leadership of the bus strike a year before, including Granger, Darbeau and Weekes (Palmer 2006: 29). Outside the High Commission, Granger, resplendent in a long dashiki, explained the protest. 'Our students in Canada felt that their dignity was affected. They protested. They were hounded and chained' (*Trinidad Guardian*, 27 February 1970). At the Royal Bank of Canada, it was Granger again who gave voice to the gathering crowd, railing through his megaphone against 'white imperialism'. Howe was there in the front row too, trading insults with one of the police chiefs. In a moment of high political sophistication, Howe pointed at one of the police officers, a man who had grown up with Howe's mother, and shouted 'it's big-moustache Lloyd!'. The policeman responded, 'I'm going to complain to your mother.' 'That would have meant something to me years, and years, and years ago!' retorted Howe (Howe 2011k).

Moving away from the bank, heading down Frederick Street, the protestors began picketing the larger stores. Waving at the displays in the window,

Granger turned to the crowd and remarked: 'They using white mannequins to sell clothes to black people!'. It was at this point that the initiative came from the crowd. Raoul Pantin, a reporter with the *Trinidad Guardian*, describes the moment thus:

From the depths of the crowd, a man suddenly shouted: "The church! The church! Lets go in church! . . . And among a steadily growing, slowly hand clapping crowd now shuffling along Independence Square, the chant was struck up: "The church! The church! We go in the church!"

(Pantin 1990: 52)

Why the church? Looking back, Carl Blackwood explained, the Roman Catholic Church was the most enduring symbol of the 'white power structure' (Ibid., 54). Williams himself, in his earlier more radical days, had excoriated it as the 'last bastion of colonialism' (Kambon 1988: 197). But as Howe recalls it, the crowd were simply responding to immediate circumstances. The protest had attracted a large contingent of police. In fact, as the *Trinidad Guardian* records, by the time the protestors reached the Bank, a bus had arrived packed with 'a fully armed police riot squad' (27 February 1970). In short, the crowd entered the Cathedral seeking sanctuary from the police.

This turn of events was unexpected. The demonstration was first and foremost a protest about the events at George Williams. Granger and Darbeau had not anticipated or planned for an occupation of the Cathedral. They needed a speaker, someone to address the impromptu sit-in. Howe's cousin, who was part of the student movement, put him forward; as the son of a preacher, he was the obvious candidate. Howe had no time to prepare; 'it was scuffles with police one minute, speaking in the Cathedral the next'. Nonetheless, Howe stepped up and spoke. Next day, the gospel according to Darcus Howe made the front page of the *Trinidad Guardian*:

Speaker Darcus Owusu told the demonstrators: "The Church which was founded in the name of the greatest agitator who ever lived, is now flaunting the principles of that same agitator."

(Ibid.)

Urging the protestors to respect the sanctity of the church, Howe preached Christ redeemer and revolutionary from the pulpit of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Blackwood followed, taking up the same theme. 'The Church,' he said, 'had betrayed the message of its founder, Jesus Christ' (Ibid.). The time had

come to drive the moneylenders out of the Temple and proclaim the true message of salvation and social justice at the heart of the Gospels. After the speeches, the Black Power congregation engaged in a symbolic cleansing of the temple. The slogan on everyone's lips was 'Power! Power!'; black cloths were draped over the statues of the virgin and the Apostle Paul; a placard proclaiming 'FREEDOM NOW' was hung on St Peter's outstretch hand, the hand which held the keys to the Kingdom of God; St Francis of Assisi, the intercessor for the common people, held a similar banner (Ibid.).

Howe left the Cathedral before the end of the occupation, as clerics debated Black Power and mysteries of the faith with the revolutionary congregation. After about an hour, the demonstrators left the Cathedral and took their protest to business centres on Broadway and South Quay (Meeks 1996: 13). The day ended with speeches in Woodford Square, a place that would later take on a revolutionary significance as the People's Parliament. Before the day ended, Howe could already see the significance of what had happened: a revolution had started.

Acceleration

The events of 26 February showed that the Black Power Movement was much more than the inconsequential nuisance the government had supposed. With hindsight, the government's understanding of the potential of the movement is almost unintelligible, given the ongoing economic problems and the strength of feeling on campus. In a sense, the student movement had picked up from where Williams had left off. Howe recalls the power of Williams' 'Massa day done' speech of 1961. It asserted the independence of the people of Trinidad and Tobago and set Howe's heart beating (Howe 2011k). However, Williams' economic strategy rested on attracting large-scale investment from America and Britain (Palmer 2006: 284) and, in that sense, ceding economic power to white businessmen. As far as black radicals were concerned, Williams had reneged on his promises; the country was independent in name only. For Granger, 'independent' Trinidad was a place where one master had replaced another, where 'BLACK MASSA, DOING WHITE MASSA WUK' (Granger 1969: 65). That said, the economic imperialism was only part of the problem. At a deeper level, there was the issue of 'Cultural Slavery' (Darbeau 1969: 63). Writing in *East Dry River*, a mimeographed news-sheet produced by NJAC, Darbeau

argued that the government had detached itself from the people due to a lack of a cultural base:

Political leaders divorce themselves from their black brothers when they get into Parliament because the black community lacks the cultural bonds which make people love each other, respect each other and understand each other.

(Ibid.)

Fundamentally, Darbeau continued, the new government had crushed the people's spirit of independence:

We are guilty of the same self-contempt, self-despisement and servility to the whites (all stemming from the white values which dominate the society) which lead the Williams band to hold cocktail parties at the Country Club and trample the interests of the Black Community.

(Ibid., 64)

Williams had inspired a generation and given voice to their desire for freedom (Palmer 2006: 285). A decade on, Williams' neocolonial settlement was not enough for them, but Williams did not fully understand the power of the forces that he had helped to create. Desperately, Williams sought to ban a number of 'subversive' books, including the works of his former teacher and friend C. L. R. James, and his own radical work of history *Capitalism and Slavery* on the basis that 'they might give these half educated Negroes the wrong idea' (Dhondy 2001: 142).

The government could not let the protest of 26 February go unchallenged. The demonstration had focused on the symbols of post-colonial oppression: the institutional Church, the bank, the business district; symbols of three institutions that could be plausibly described as white-dominated (Ibid.). In this sense, protests constituted a direct challenge to Williams' Trinidad. Therefore, 27 February began with a series of dawn raids as the nine leading members of the demonstration, including Granger, Darbeau, Blackwood and Weekes, were arrested. The defendants were charged with 'disorderly behaviour in a place of worship' (Oxaal 1971: 23) and refused bail (Kambon 1988: 199). There was also a government-backed media offensive against the movement. From the government's point of view, the occupation of the Cathedral was a gift. Statements were issued and headlines written appealing to the religious convictions of the populous. Now it was the government's turn to sermonize, condemning the 'desecration' of the holy place by lawless hooligans. 'No demonstration,' the *Trinidad Guardian* opined, 'anywhere has a right to degenerate into the level of desecration and disorder.' 'No self-respecting citizen,' the Editorial continued,

'relishes the thought of an unruly mob wandering around town at random from place to place' (27 February 1970). Yet the government had miscalculated. The arrests turned a protest of hundreds into a movement of thousands. Having spent 24 hours in prison, the nine were granted bail (Kambon 1988: 199). By the time they were released, the campaign for the nine had already begun.

The first wave of protest hit on 4 March. A demonstration of 10,000 people marched from Woodford Square to 'Shanty Town', one of the worst slums in the capital. The destination of the protest was symbolic. Granger explained, 'We are going to Shanty Town . . . because every black man in this country is a Shanty Town!' (*Trinidad Guardian*, 5 March 1970). Granger also imbued the arrests with symbolic significance. The arrests were made under 'slave laws' drawn up by the British in the 1840s (Oxaal 1971: 32). Clearly, he argued, colonialism was alive and well in Trinidad. In that sense, as the *Trinidad Guardian* reported, the protest of 4 March was about much more than the arrest of nine radicals, it was an 'attack upon the "White racist power structure and its black tools"' (Ibid.). The *Express* concurred, the original aims of 26 February has been subsumed by a wider movement demanding fundamental change. The sheer scale of the demonstration was captured in the headlines the next day. The *Express* called it 'Mammoth'. All commentators agreed on the disciplined and peaceful nature of the protests (Kambon 1988: 200).

The strength of the protest intensified over the next 2 days. On 5 March, the demonstrators were charged by mounted police outside the court where Granger, Darbeau, Weekes and their co-defendants were standing trial. Protestors fleeing police violence smashed windows in downtown Port-of-Spain, and a ministerial residence was petrol-bombed (Meeks 1998: 19). The trial was inconclusive. The nine were released and the case postponed. March 6 saw even greater crowds, between 14,000 and 20,000, marching to San Juan, and Granger openly 'declaring "war" on the establishment' (Pantin 1990: 59). Granger declared the demonstration a march of liberation and a march of anger. Nonetheless, the day passed without violence. Property was destroyed in the evening. Eyewitness reports stated that the 'police on duty had stood by and done nothing' (Ibid.), the implication being that the violence was the work of *agents provocateurs*.

Spontaneity, discipline and leadership

Ivar Oxaal, the first writer to produce an extended scholarly treatment of the events of 1970, notes that the emphasis was on spontaneous action during the

revolution. In this sense, he argues that the Trinidad's Black Power revolution 'could qualify as an eminently Jamesian revolutionary moment' (Oxaal 1971: 24). This is very much the way Howe sees it. The events of March had made insurrection the order of the day, and as an intellectual, following Fanon, Howe interpreted this as a sure sign that colonialism in Trinidad was finally dying. Howe took his cue from the people. What, then, was the relationship between the intellectuals, the would-be leaders of the movement and the masses? 'This,' Howe comments, 'is where CLR is a genius'; it is not simply that the intellectuals follow where the people lead. More significantly, when the people move, the intellectuals themselves are freed, freed from old ideas, old categories and intellectual constraints. The role of the intellectual in these circumstances is to reflect and give voice to the agenda that emerges spontaneously from the masses (Howe 2011k).

There were several groups and a number of individuals who either led or tried to lead the people during the revolution. NJAC was preeminent. The movement, as noted above, had coalesced in solidarity with the students of Sir George Williams University. It was formed on the St Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies. The founders included Granger, the president of the Student Guild and Darbeau. The group's focus was broad, comprehending 'the students in Canada, British action in Anguilla and non-action in Zimbabwe, racism, foreign domination of the economy', among other causes (Kambon 1988: 194).

Tapia House was another self-proclaimed centre of the Black Power Movement that emerged from the university. It was founded by George Best, a Cambridge-educated economist. Best was more of an academic than an activist. Kambon describes his rhetorical style as a long-winded mix of 'academic terminology interspersed with popular phrases, folk sayings and sports analogies . . .' (Kambon 1988: 174). Best supported Black Power, but was critical of spontaneous mass action. In essence, Best believed that the protestors understood neither the situation nor the effects of their actions (Meeks 1998: 20). Needless to say, James, who was in Britain during the revolution, was highly critical of Best's approach (Oxall 1971: 85).

Another group associated with the movement, for a time at least, were the Black Panthers. The Panthers were an extremely small group who wore the black berets and the black gloves associated with the American Panther aesthetic. Their leader Aldwyn Primus, a founding member of NJAC, played an ambiguous role in the events of 1970. According to *Tapia*, he was a powerful speaker who was 'able to hold the attention of thousands. . . . His shouts of power were hysterical

and orgasmic. They electrified the crowd' (*Tapia*, 21 July 1974). Whatever the gifts of their leader, as a group, the Panthers were too small to bring about any meaningful change (Kambon 1988: 202).

Howe worked primarily within the OIWU as deputy editor of *The Vanguard*. During 1969, Wally Look Lai became editor with Darbeau as his deputy. However, Darbeau's increasing involvement with NJAC led to his departure from *The Vanguard*. Howe took his place. Look Lai was an Oxford graduate who had formerly written for the *Express*. Howe and Look Lai got on well. There was an ideological affinity as both men were Jamesians, Look Lai having been a member of James' study group in London in 1962 which also involved Walter Rodney, Richard Small, Norman Girvan and others. Look Lai would collect Howe from his parent's home early in the morning in his Volkswagen, and together they would drive to the paper's headquarters in San Fernando. The office was small; Howe and Look Lai effectively ran the paper between them. Howe operated on his own initiative, on occasion referring to Look Lai for retrospective permission when right wingers in the union complained about his radicalism. Day-to-day, Howe's prime task was writing features and editing a mass of contributions from the 'shop floor' (Howe 2011k). Kambon credits *The Vanguard* with being 'a major voice of the revolution' during the heady days of 1970 (Kambon 1988: 236). In addition to *The Vanguard*, numerous news-sheets sprang up during the revolution. These included 'St James Youth Voice; Black Drum; [and] Let The Black Woman Talk' (Pantin 1990: 59).

It was in the pages of *The Vanguard* that Howe revealed his vision for a liberated Trinidad. Central to this was popular control of the nation's oil industry. This was not nationalization in the traditional sense of state control. Rather, Howe envisaged the socialization of the industry, placing the industry under the direct control of the workers. Behind closed doors, Howe was also discussing other aspects of post-revolutionary Trinidad with Look Lai and the radical young army officers Rex Lasalle and Raffique Shah. In this forum, discussions turned to restoring order in the wake of governmental collapse. Howe advocated an alliance between his own organization and the army, the creation of a kind of citizens' militia – a model of socialization that had been advocated by radicals from Rousseau to Marx.

On 12 March, Howe took part in the 'Long March' and also covered it on behalf of *The Vanguard*. The demonstration was a 28-mile march from Port-of-Spain to the sugar belts of Caroni County. The slogan was 'Indians and Africans Unite Now'. Around 6,000 set off again from Woodford Square. Bhadase Maraj, spokesman for the East Indian community, head of the All Trinidad Sugar Estates

and Factory Workers Trade Union and the leader of the Democratic Labour Party, had opposed the initiative, threatening marchers with violence if they entered the belts (Bennett 1989: 139). The march was of particular concern to Howe, who had an ongoing desire for Afro-Indian unity. The results were mixed. Maraj kept up his defiance. However, as Pantin records, 'a scattering of mostly young Indian men and women stood at the side of the road to welcome the demonstrators with applause' (Pantin 1990: 65). Others, including Raffique Shah's father, offered the marchers refreshments. The march was disciplined, almost silent, and as Pantin argues, 'it made its point: AFRICANS AND INDIANS could UNITE' (Ibid.). In Meeks' words, at the very least, 'the march served to breach a psychological barrier' between the two communities (Meeks 1998: 22).

Howe's report in *The Vanguard* starts by noting how 'official society' sought to undermine the purpose of the march, Afro-Indian unity. Notwithstanding Bhadese and his 'Al Capone style threats of violence', or the warning of anarchy issued by the Attorney General in his new role as Williams' henchman, the march had succeeded in laying the foundation of unity between the two communities. Howe declared that the triumph of the Long March pointed to 'the unmistakable and irrefutable fact that a new society is being born, one which is battling on all sides for expression' (*The Vanguard*, 21 March 1970).

Ebb and flow

Williams, who had remained silent about the mass protest following the occupation of the Cathedral, addressed the nation on 23 March. His speech was aired on television and radio. Its conciliatory tone was a surprise to many. He acknowledged the right to march, and in an attempt to regain the initiative, he sacked his industrial minister – a man who had previously accused the Black Power Movement of being directed by communists. He announced new programmes to address unemployment, which were to be financed from a new 5 per cent tax on industry, and demanded an end to racism in the labour market (Bennett 1989: 140). More daring still was the announcement that he intended to extend his nationalization plans, promising that in 10 years, the government's economic control would exceed Castro's control over Cuba's economy (Pantin 1990: 73).

Williams' promises had little effect. According to the *Express*, the speech did nothing to dispel the view that the government was on the side of business and

other vested interests (*Express*, 1 April 1970). Howe, too, argues that by this time, Williams had no authority among the people on the streets.

Once again, Williams was out of step with the amazing transformation that was going on in the country. The atmosphere was extraordinary. Howe argues that the protests, the marches, the Peoples' Parliament on Woodford Square, all the grass-roots activism embodied the spirit of Malcolm X's famous adage 'by any means necessary'. Something had finished. Massa day really was done, at least in the minds and hearts of the crowds. Remarkably, the revolution brought healing to the nation. On a personal level, Howe recalls how people who had not spoken for years were reconciled; relationships that had ossified were reinvigorated. Politically too, there was an end of internecine strife: 'all that tension between Indian and African, it swept it away'. There was a unity between the young and the old. There was anger, too, and what Howe described as an explosion of the personality, but machismo was in retreat. Traditional and formal modes of address gave way to 'brother' and 'sister'. Everywhere there was discussion and debate; the revolution changed the very rhythm of people's speech. For Howe, Trinidad was remade. It changed from a place where 'all thought had ceased' to a place where people were plunged into a 'whirlpool of reason'. As a result, people were speaking with greater deliberation, with longer pauses between their words. 'This turned into a style. They wouldn't answer for a second or two, and then answer. There was a social patience. . . . It was *almost*, not quite almost, as if we had turned into angels.' What Howe was witnessing, in nascent state, was what James had been arguing for, for so long: a democracy like that of ancient Athens was emerging on the streets of Trinidad. The discussion was so intense, Howe concludes, that it would have been no surprise to bump into a latter-day Plato or Pericles on the street corner (Howe 2011k).

As might be expected, the British High Commissioner, Richard Hunt, saw things differently. A month or so after the revolution had been put down, he reported back to Britain that the tone of the radicals had been bellicose in the extreme. '[K]illing,' he noted, 'was a commonplace theme in the speeches in Woodford Square.' 'The NJAC leaders,' he continued, 'would, I imagine, like to frighten away the white community – if necessary, or for preference, by killing some of them.' This was not what Howe saw, and it should be noted that Hunt was only brought in as High Commissioner after the revolution was over. White capitalists were, as far as Howe could see, 'the least of our worries,' they were far away in New York, London or Toronto. Political scientist William R. Lux concurs. 'The paradox here,' he argues, speaking of Black Power across the Caribbean, 'is

Figure 2 Howe speaking during the Freedom March in Woodford Square, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, April 1969.

that these riots, revolts and boycotts are not against white foreign oppressors but against black governments and leaders' (Lux 1972: 214). That is not to say that there was no violence against white people. Howe recalls one incident when a white merchant abused one of his black customers, telling him to 'move your black fucking self out of here'. A crowd gathered outside the business to protest, Granger addressed them, relating the incident, ending his narration, 'and then . . . and then . . . and then . . .' and in seconds the business was burning. Significantly, the violence was against property rather than a person, and this incident was the exception, not the rule. The vast majority of reports, even in the conservative press, stress the discipline and peaceful nature of the protests (Howe 2011k).

The state, by contrast, routinely used violence against people. Early April saw the base of the movement widen. On 1 April, the National Association of Steelbandmen, traditional supporters of Williams' PNM, joined the revolution. Then, on 4 April, the OWTU officially announced its support for the movement (Meeks 1998: 26). Conservatives in the government urged repression and editorials in the right-wing press demanded the restoration of law and order. It was in this context that Basil Davis, a young man of 22, was shot dead by police in Port-of-Spain during a demonstration. Police violence had accompanied the protests from the beginning, but Davis was the first to be killed and, as a consequence, the first 'martyr' of the revolution (MacDonald 1989: 164).

Davis' funeral on 9 April became the focal point of the revolution. Estimates vary, but somewhere between 30,000 and 100,000 people turned out to mourn his loss (Bennett 1989: 141). Howe, who had been playing a discreet role since 26 February, once again stepped into the limelight. He was asked to read a poem at the funeral. The significance of the event was massive, and Howe chose the moment to bring his organization to the attention of the public.

In the lead up to the funeral, he also laid down a challenge:

I said let's wear a scarlet red dashiki top, and black trousers, black basketball boots. And I wanted to see how many of them would rise to the occasion and get the money and get it made, and quickly . . . when we came into the Basil Davis funeral there were a minimum of 10,000 people at the beginning. And there was this huge gasp, when I walked in with my organisation. "What the fuck is this?" It looked kind of military. . . . It was half men and half young women, they hadn't seen that either . . .

(Howe 2012k)

As Howe looked out, he saw 200 people wearing the red, which symbolized Davis's blood, and black, the traditional colour of mourning. It was a deliberate strategy to recruit women. At the back of Howe's mind was the impact of the feminist movement in America and France, particularly its role in the French revolution of 1968. 'You couldn't get anywhere without women, and they responded immediately.' But Howe's commitment to involving women in the revolution was not based purely on the experience of 1968. Fanon had produced a theoretical account of women in the Algerian revolution which also informed Howe's strategy. *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, sets out a description and an analysis of the Algerian civil war, which stresses the role of women. In essence, it argued that the moment civil war became revolution was the moment at which the women took an active part in the fight against French colonialism, as the involvement of women itself marked a fundamental transformation in the social order of the colony.

Emergency and rebellion

For a time, the momentum for change seemed unstoppable. Following the funeral, Trinidad's progressive unions began to assert themselves. In mid-April, the strikes started. On 17 April, around 300 workers at the Water and Sewerage Authority downed tools (Kiely 1996: 123). Two days later, a strike started at the

Brechin Castle sugar estate. Both strikes were fundamentally political rather than economic; both were acts of solidarity with the Black Power Movement. The sugar strike was highly significant as it demonstrated the unity between the Indian sugar workers and black-African protestors. Buoyed by this turn of events, Weekes let it be known that he hoped the oil workers would soon join the strike. In the third week of April, almost every business, factory and government agency was hit by at least one strike (Harvey 1974: 46).

It was in this context, with a general strike on the horizon, that Howe proposed a new radical slogan: 'Seize Power and send for James.' The demonstrations and protests had changed Trinidad, but for Howe, protest was not an end in itself. At some point, protest had to turn into a new politics. Howe's connection to the shop floor through *The Vanguard*, his connection to the grass roots through his 'organisation', his participation in the Long March and the funeral of Basil Davis led him to the slogan, not as a call to arms, but as a theoretical point: the Williams government had lost its authority, the time was right for the people to shape the destiny of their nation. Howe was not alone in sensing the imminent fall of the government, the British High Commissioner advised Williams that 'Weekes would be unstoppable unless a State of Emergency was imposed' (NA FCO 63/594).

Following an emergency meeting of the Cabinet, the government declared a State of Emergency on 21 April. Police rounded up the primary leaders of the movement immediately, with the exception of Granger, who evaded capture for a few days. Weekes, Nunez, Darbeau and nine others were then taken under police guard, via Coast Guard patrol boat to Nelson Island. Howe too was targeted. Armed police raided his parents' house on a mission to arrest him. Yet, he stayed out of police hands by making sure he never slept under the same roof more than once. His strategy was simple. He would go to a friend's house, feign illness, sleep over and leave at first light. The story of the confrontation between the police and Howe's parents has entered Howe family lore. The police marched into the house with guns and crowbars. Their initial search yielded nothing, so they started to poke about in the under stair's cupboard. This was too much for Howe's mother. The usually demure Mrs Howe gave the police commissioner a piece of her mind: 'What do think, my son is a fucking cockroach!'. That said, she picked up a crowbar and threw it at the commissioner. Outside, the Commissioner of Police levelled with Howe's father: 'next time you see your son', he said, 'he may be in a box'. The Reverend Howe responded in kind: 'If you make those kind of threats against my son, it will be you who ends up in a box.' Howe was aware of the threats, but he did not take them seriously. There was a body

of senior officers who, either due to the fact that they had grown up with Howe, or due to their commitment to the rule of law, would never sanction political assassinations (Howe 2011k).

Small-scale violence in Port-of-Spain was put down fairly quickly, as was an attempt to defy the State of Emergency at the Brechin Castle sugar works (Meeks 1998: 30). The State of Emergency was, however, more precarious than it seemed. It relied on the support of the military, but a significant section of the military refused to turn against their own people. The Trinidad and Tobago Regiment, a force of 750 men based at Teteron Bay in the north west of Trinidad, rebelled. A group of Sandhurst-trained junior officers led by young Lieutenants Raffique Shah, Rex Lasalle and Mike Barzie seized control of the Regiment and Teteron barracks, locking up the senior officers. From the outside, the purpose of the rebellion was initially unclear. In the immediate aftermath, rumours swept Port-of-Spain, that 'the army was coming over the hills' to support the rebels (Kambon 1998: 206). There was also talk that Williams had a helicopter on standby and was preparing to leave the country.

Howe's links to the army connected him to the very officers who had led the rebellion. He had met Shah and Lasalle through Look Lai. What's more, there had been an immediate rapport between Howe and Shah. Howe had grown up with Indians, and he 'had an ease with Raff that some others did not have'. A small group comprising Howe, Shah, Lasalle, Look Lai and UWI lecturer Franklin Harvey coalesced, meeting from time to time to discuss matters of political concern. The rapport was also political. Shah was a self-confessed revolutionary. Many of the junior officers, he recalls, considered themselves "leftists" and "revolutionaries," although we weren't of the Marxist mould. Our heroes were Argentina-born, Cuban-internationalist Che Guevara, Martiniquan psychiatrist and writer Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X (whose autobiography was considered required reading at Teteron) and Guyanese professor Walter Rodney' (Shah 2011a). Howe was not alone in having connections to the army. As Shah put it: 'Most soldiers, although they came from a PNM family background, also had connections with the young men and women who formed the core of the protesters' (Shah 2011b). Due to his position in the army, Shah, regardless of his political sympathies, had to keep his distance from protests during the revolution. Nonetheless, speculation about the loyalties of the army was published in *The Vanguard* in mid-March.

Inside the base, the objectives of the mutiny were much clearer. For Shah, the purpose of the rebellion was first and foremost to prevent the army being used against the people of Trinidad. There were certainly people in the barracks

who argued for an armed overthrow of the government, but this was never the object of those who led the rebellion (Shah 2011). For some time, Howe had anticipated a military rising against the government. Hearing of the rebellion, Howe assembled his organization as best he could and headed for St James, a town *en route* from Teteron to Port-of-Spain. Howe waited on the high street, in hope that the army would march to Port-of-Spain.

In Teteron, the rebels were losing ground. Pantin reported that a convoy of troops was ready to leave the base: '200-odd men who, battle-ready, appeared eager to begin the drive to Port of Spain.' However, Pantin mistook the objective. The regiment were heading to Camp Ogden, located on Long Circular Road in St James. Trinity, a Coast Guard boat which had opened fire on the ammunition bunker earlier in the morning, started firing again. This time, it targeted the troops leaving the base. The first attempt to leave the base was turned back, as was a second attempt later that morning. The rebels had the firepower to destroy the Trinity and the Courland Bay, a second Coast Guard vessel patrolling the bay, but the price would have been too high: it would have involved killing over 100 people. For Shah, there was no question: 'We would die for the revolution, but we would not kill for it' (Channel 4 2006). As a result, the rebels, who had already lost one man, returned to the base.

Howe waited on the St James High Street, backed by his organization, with the commissioner of the police on the other side of the road. He was in a strong position, so an arrest was out of the question. The situation was tense. The police commissioner, no doubt expecting to be swept away by the organized revolutionaries, asked, his voice trembling, what was going on. 'It's too early to say', was Howe's only response. Shah recalls that once the rebellion started, the soldiers had no contact with the movement beyond the barracks for a full 10 days. However, somehow a one-word message reached Howe telling him to 'retreat'. At this point, Howe saw the truth. The balance of power had shifted decisively in favour of the government. There would be no armed rebellion. The revolution was over. Perhaps sensing a change in Howe's mood, the police commissioner, with renewed confidence, came to the point: Was Howe waiting for the army? Howe responded: 'Do I look like an army man to you?'

Epilogue

On learning of the mutiny, Williams contacted foreign governments for assistance. International white power, that amorphous entity which had been

blasted consistently during the revolution, solidified and agreed to aid the government. The British cabinet agonized over the decision, but in spite of their troubled consciences, they dispatched *HMS Jupiter* and *HMS Sirius* to shore up Williams' government, the latter carrying a detachment of Royal Marines who were authorized to defend British citizens and British property in Trinidad. America sent munitions, a helicopter carrier and placed five other vessels on standby. Venezuela too sent warships, one to the waters off Port-of-Spain, the other to the barracks at Teteron Bay (Palmer 2006: 239–40). On the morning of 22 April, the rebels in Teteron Bay started negotiations with the government.

Howe spent the next couple of days evading the police and trying to arrange to leave the country. This was a retreat, not a desertion. Howe remained loyal to his friend, and once he was safely away, he started raising money to provide for the defence of Shah and the other officers who were charged with treason. All would receive lengthy custodial sentences, reduced on appeal, and go on to play important roles in shaping Trinidad's future. In Shah's case, this involved becoming a leader of the Sugar Cane Workers Union, and helping to form and lead, with George Weeks, the United Labour Front which came second in the 1976 Election. In the final analysis, Howe had no need to escape. Old friends from QRC who had risen through the ranks of the customs and immigration service allowed him to leave the country unimpeded. Howe headed for Amsterdam and then returned to London.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed account of the George Williams Event, see Eber (1969).
- 2 The government's attitude to Black Power may well have been more nuanced than this statement implies. Indeed, the ban placed by the government on Stokely Carmichael's visit to the Trinidad in 1969 indicates that there were concerns about the movement's potential.